

Something to Talk About

A conversation guide for church leaders

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Congregationalism – Friend or Foe?

We've all heard the horror stories. It seems that every pastor and board member dreads the "open microphone" aspect of a congregational meeting. I often do, too. I came of age in a "battling Baptist" form of congregationalism that knew its share of occasional long, vociferous battles over things that really didn't matter.

The Evangelical Free Church defines itself (in part) as "an association and fellowship of autonomous but interdependent congregations of like faith and congregational government" that is focused on obeying the Great Commission to the glory of God.¹ Yet, for some of us, the phrase "congregational government" brings bad thoughts and memories or tales of things gone horribly wrong.

Is congregationalism friend or foe? That's something to talk about.

In most of my conversations with church leaders about congregational governance, fears mostly come from congregationalism's abuses and excesses, not from what it is supposed to be. There are many different forms of congregationalism among the many churches and groups/denominations that practice it, ranging from "everything is decided by the committee of the whole" to "we bring virtually nothing to the congregation." Additionally, there is no "one size fits all" congregationalism that fits or works well for all sizes of churches in all places.

The EFCA has described congregationalism as "that form of government wherein the highest authority under Christ in a local church resides in the corporate understanding of the mind of Christ and in which a realistic process and reasonable opportunity exists by which that understanding is determined and carried out, especially as it affects such matters as:

1. Determination of membership.
2. Selection or appointment of the principal governing board (elder, deacon, etc.).
3. Selection of the senior pastor or senior directional leader(s).
4. Approval of an annual church budget.
5. Approval of any major purchase of dissolution."²

¹ EFCA Articles of Incorporation, Article II, Section A.

² *Evangelical Convictions*, Appendix Two, page 262.

Then there is this: “An (Evangelical Free Church) entrusts much of the decision–making to godly leaders who are trained, trusted and allowed to lead.”³

It’s important to note that, while EFCA churches are free to customize their practices of congregationalism to suit their circumstances, the example of congregationalism that EFCA provides reserves only six decisions to the congregation and suggests delegating the rest to the leaders they have approved/appointed to serve in the ministry of leadership and oversight.

With these considerations in mind, it appears that many of the problems churches face by having congregational governance are not related to *being* congregational; rather, they are related to how they choose to *do* congregationalism. How we *do* congregationalism is something to talk about. Here are some ideas for starting your conversation.

- Are we generally happy or unhappy with the conduct of people, including ourselves, during our business meetings? Have we equipped our congregation to do congregationalism well? Have we equipped our leaders to lead these meetings well? What scriptures speak to how members should treat one another in a congregational meeting setting? Have we ever taught those things, and if not, how would the congregation know how they are expected to behave?
- When a person sins against others during a meeting, do we address that sin? If we don’t address sin, sinful behavior appears to be acceptable behavior. Should we address sinful behaviors during our meetings? Do we let our “open microphone” be used to facilitate sinning against one another? What behaviors need to be addressed during the meeting? What should be addressed afterwards?
- Does our church reserve to the congregation more decisions than described by EFCA? To do so is not wrong, but is it helping the church or hindering the church? Has growth caused the current system to no longer work well?
- Some churches have heated discussions about budgets (I’m not sure what is the difference between “heated discussions” and “arguments,” but participants seldom call them arguments). The problem might be related to what we leaders are asking the congregation to consider. Budgets are usually created a couple months before the end of the current fiscal year and are used throughout the next fiscal year. None of us know what specific needs will be 14 or 15 months from now. Here are some ideas to consider:
 - Do we present a line-item budget for the congregation to approve? If so, our actions demonstrate that we are asking them to approve each line item. Can we ask our congregation to approve a budget using much broader categories? We would use our line-item figures, if needed, to illustrate where the amounts in the broader categories came from and have more freedom to move money from line to line and fewer fine details to potentially argue about – I mean discuss.
 - Do we present our budget as a spending *plan* or as a spending *blueprint*? Approving a spending plan allows for flexibility as the year progresses. Approving

³ Ibid.

a spending blueprint provides little flexibility as the year progresses. How should we present our budget for approval?

- The size and complexity of the church should be considered in how a church does congregationalism. Here are some things to consider.
 - A small church is like family. We gather to discuss lots of things in a family-like atmosphere, and deciding most everything as a congregation can work.
 - As the church grows and becomes more complex, strict congregationalism no longer works as well so the congregation likely needs to decide fewer things together and entrust most things to their leaders (typically board or elders). I call this iteration “elder led congregationalism.”
 - Large and mega churches have lots of staff so elders/board members must decide fewer things themselves and entrust most things to staff. I call this “staff-led, elder-governed congregationalism.” The staff leads and the elders/board members set the boundaries and direction and provide wise counsel. The congregation makes very few decisions because there is no way to adequately inform them of the many details needed for them to make wise decisions.
 - What model is in place at your church? Strict congregational? Elder-led congregationalism? Staff-led, elder-governed congregationalism? Is it working or do you need to make changes?
- When we set up our congregational business meetings, do we set them up as “gathering to understand the mind of Christ?” How might we improve in setting up our meetings to accomplish that noble and highly desirable goal?
- Think back to recent congregational business meetings. How did we prepare our congregation *before the meeting* to be able to participate in a thoughtful, informed manner? Did we give opportunity for them to have questions answered and gain information *before* the meeting? Are there things we should do better next time?

Congregational governance is a key part of being an Evangelical Free Church. When it works well it’s great. When it doesn’t, it can be awful. How is it working for you? If it’s going well, praise God! If it’s not going well...; then it should be something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.*

This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders’ conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.